

*And looking intently at the council, Paul said, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” <sup>2</sup> And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. <sup>3</sup> Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?” <sup>4</sup> Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God's high priest?” <sup>5</sup> And Paul said, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’” <sup>6</sup> Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” <sup>7</sup> And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. <sup>8</sup> For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. <sup>9</sup> Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?” <sup>10</sup> And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks. <sup>11</sup> The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”*

*(Pastor prays)*

Like many of you, Paul had a plan. Something he thought a lot about. He spoke of it often, prayed about it and that plan gives hope. That plan, your plan, points towards a future and its almost always hopeful. A pregnant wife, plans for a healthy child. A student plans for graduation. An engaged couple plans for a wedding. An employee plans for promotion or retirement – or a better job. Plans mean hope and hope is a motivator. Like you, Paul had a plan. His was well thought out, rightly motivated and Gospel centered. But when we find him in Acts 23, especially v. 11, it feels like everything he planned for was failing miserably. In Chapter 21, he made it to Jerusalem. The church questioned his character. James wanted him to compromise. He goes to the temple. His ministry insulted. His sincerity in suspect. His passion is defeated and his testimony is rejected. Every time the man opened his mouth, a riot started. There were doubts settling in about the future of his ministry and I guess what I want to do this morning is walk through the passage in its context. Read it with comment and then come back and make a few points to encourage you. If Paul needed encouragement, then so do we! Let's read the passage.

Paul was battered, discouraged and uncertain about the future. The crucified resurrected Jesus gives us real hope where false hope has failed. We learn something about life and failure here. We learn about faithfulness without success and the staying power that a servant of Jesus can have.

## **The Reigning Christ Stiffens Our Resolve and Secures Our Hope**

### **I. In His Presence, There is Strength**

Every bit of Paul's trouble comes from testifying. Giving testimony of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – and more specifically, his testimony of the resurrection. Because, the resurrection of Christ is victory and vindication and without it – there is no Gospel. When we join Paul in v. 11, He is right in the middle of one of the darkest nights of his life. For years he had wanted to give a fruitful witness in Jerusalem but when he got there, the church was shallow and his preaching fell on deaf ears. For all practical purposes, his vision for a successful ministry was up in smoke. The worst fears about his ministry had come true. What everyone said had happened. All the predictions of danger and failure. They were all coming true. And if you are not careful, it can feel like one big mistake. Spurgeon looked at this passage and said the excitement of the day kept his spirits up. But then the night came, just like it always does and that's the beauty of this passage, especially v. 11. "That following night, the Lord stood by him". Isn't that what the Lord has always done with his people that are serving him? Isn't that what he said to Jacob – "I'll not leave you". To Joshua – "I will not leave or forsake you, I'll be with you". David in Psalm 23 "even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil. You are with me." The Lord spoke in Isaiah 43, "When you pass through the waters – I'll be with you." In the difficulty of church life, Matthew 18 says confront sin and when 2 or 3 are gathered doing such difficult ministry, I'll be with you! We are a great commission people believing that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the Gospel and we are compelled in Matthew 28, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" Paul had done that in the text and now he is locked up in the Tower of Antonia. He is humiliated, alone, rejected and filthy. Like Elijah under the juniper tree or John the Baptist in Herod's jail. He felt the weight of failure, just like some of you. The Lord knows who you are and he is aware of your condition. He sympathizes with your peculiar grief. Psalm 103:14 promises that "*For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*" And in the story, for the Lord to stand with is to sympathize with, to bear with, to enter into the experiences of another. Like the 3 Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. When

Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fiery furnace in Daniel 3:25, *“But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”* In his presence, there is strength and that strength is found in Christ. It’s his perfect, life, death on the cross in the place of sinners, his bodily resurrection from the dead, and that even in history is connected to you in the present through faith in Christ. He stiffens our resolve and secures our hope. In his presence, there is strength.

## II. In His Word, There is Hope

In v. 11, Jesus stands by Paul in his dark night when he says. *“Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”*

Let’s take what Jesus says and split it into past, present and future. In the next section (V 21-22), 40 men were plotting to kill him. Christ was encouraging him about his past. You testified about me in Jerusalem. Something that would be considered a failure in anybody’s church growth model. Outreach magazine won’t be calling Paul to see how he grew a church but the Lord by his presence and his words, commends him. It’s Paul’s faithfulness, his witness. He didn’t capitulate to political pressure; he didn’t compromise his Gospel platform for pragmatism or the lesser of two evils. He simply did what God called him to do. He told the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the saving power of God’s grace through faith in Christ. The past – regardless of the outcomes – faithfulness is never a failure. That was the past. What about the present in v. 11? The English is “take courage” or “be of good cheer” but it’s really just one word. There he is, battered, discouraged and uncertain of the future. Jesus came and said the same thing he said to the disciples that were on a boat in the storm. In Matthew 14, he came walking on the water. “Take heart”. It’s the same thing he said to the paralyzed in Matthew 9 – “Take courage, your sins are forgiven. “Or the woman with the 12 years of hemorrhaging, “Take courage, your faith has healed you.” Or in John 16, on the night of the crucifixion. “Take courage, I have overcome the world.” Only Jesus uses this phrase in the New Testament and he alone, his word alone, gives strength for the present. SO what about the future? A sovereign Lord addresses that as well in v. 11. “As you testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify in Rome.” God had a job for Paul to do. Each life is an assignment. Paul’s life ministry, call, conversion, his travels, were by design. All his struggles and problems – by design. John Wesley “Danger is nothing in the eyes of God. Hindrances further his work.” By faith in Christ and his work on the cross, Paul was a servant of God. His life was planned. No servant of God ever dies a premature death. Your life ministry and your future are secure in the hands of God. Take courage, as you have been faithful before, be faithful still, until he calls you home. Look to the reigning Christ who stiffens our resolve and secures our future. In his presence there is strength and in his word there is hope.

*(Pastor prays)*